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ABSTRACT

A study of the effect of regular sustained silent reading (SSR) periods on the reading comprehension and vocabulary of a group of adult students of English as a second language is reported. Sixteen foreign students from 10 countries enrolled at the University of South Florida participated in one of three groups. One group engaged in SSR for ten minutes daily for fifteen weeks and discussed the vocabulary they learned. Two control groups did no required SSR. After 15 weeks, the experimental group had higher reading comprehension and vocabulary scores than the control groups, but the differences were not statistically significant. However, the experimental group showed a high degree of acceptance of the SSR activity and increased at-home reading. The results are consistent with those of native-language SSR studies that indicate the technique to be effective over the long term. A longer study is recommended. The results of this study and the findings of other SSR studies are charted for reference, vocabulary learned by the experimental group is presented, and the measurement instruments used in the study are included. (MSE)

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SUSTAINED SILENT READING IN AN ESL CLASS: A STUDY

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (22nd, Chicago, IL, March 8-13, 1988).

BACKGROUND

John Petrimoulx

Sustained Silent Reading, or SSR, is not a particularly new idea as a tool for reading development. SSR is essentially reading silently for a determinate length of time, and in that sense it has been recognized as an important reading development tool from time immemorial. As a formal technique for use in a classroom situation, Hunt (1971) is credited with developing the idea and McCracken (1971) its application. However, under the rubric of free reading, SSR was studied earlier by Lawson (1968).

As SSR has been used and researched over the years, some trends have emerged as to its effectiveness in promoting reading improvement. Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984) reported four of eight SSR studies they examined showed improved reading comprehension (RC) and vocabulary (V) scores. More interestingly, all studies six months or longer in duration showed significant gains. Krashen (1986) reported on several studies that echo the results Wiesendanger and Birlem found (Table One). SSR, then, appears to be a superior reading improvement tool when used intensively over the long term. Krashen's far-reaching conclusion is that reading exposure (comprehensible input) is the only way for languaqe development to take place. He considers reading crucial not only for RC and V development but also for the development of writing style and correct grammar usage.

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Although Lawson and others (Oliver, 1970) have maintained that SSR is ineffective without some specific skills instruction, the relationship of lengthy exposure to SSR and significant gains in RC and V development seems clearly established in most studies.

While few might disagree that extensive reading is helpful (haven't we always known that?) some observers might consider SSR to be a boring classroom activity. Several studies have measured the effect of SSR on attitudes toward reading. Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984) reported nine of eleven studies of SSR showed improved attitude toward reading. (Interestingly, the two studies that showed no improvement in attitude were done with junior high school students.) Maynes (1982) reported improved attitude in remedial readers and Coely (1981) improvement in attitude of readers in alternative or community-based programs.

The implication in these studies is that a better attitude means more reading, and that in turn produces better readers. Krashen (1986) suggests that SSR develops the habit of reading, which then allows reading gains to come coincidentally. As a way of reinforcing habit, he suggests using SSR ten minutes a day to hook students on a reading material of their choice. Once they have been hooked, they will want to continue and finish the reading outside of class. Over time, they will develop the reading habit in this way.

STUDY DESIGN

Most existing research on SSR involves L1 studies. The present study joins the relatively small body of L2 research on SSR. The objectives of this studywere to measure the effect of SSR on RC and V development and on attitudes toward reading as well as to check for signs of reading habit formation.

The subjects of the study were sixteen foreign students from ten countries enrolled in the International Language Institute (ILI) of the University of South Florida. Their TOEFL range was from 475 to 525. The subjects were divided into three groups. Two groups (of five and four subjects) received no SSR, while the third group (the target group of seven subjects) did SSR ten minutes a day for fifteen weeks (one semester in the intensive ESL program of the ILI).

The target group was free to self-select reading material (some subjects brought novels or magazines) or to select from a "library" of popular magazines and graded readers (the eighty to one hundred titles included *Time*, *National Geographic*, *Insight*, and *Smithsonian*,as well as longer items such *The Hustler* and *The Road* (an anthology of short stories).

The sole requirement of each ten minute SSR period was to read silently for the allotted time. At the end of each SSR period, approximately five new vocabulary items were volunteered by the subjects for discussion and entry into a "bank" (appendix one). At the end of each week, the target group received a list which included the week's vocabulary bank entries, their dictionary meanings and an example sentence including each item.

STUDY RESULTS

To measure the effect of SSR, the target group and the two control groups took a reading comprehension test before and after the fifteen-week SSR study period (appendix two). In addition, the subjects took a vocabulary test as a part of the CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test) routinely administered by the ILI at the beginning and end of each fifteen-week semester. The average +/- change in the RC and V scores was computed for the three groups (tables two and three).

The results placed the three groups within a five percent margin of difference on the RC test and within a two and one half percent margin on the V test. Therefore, while the target group showed RC and V gains greater than the two control groups, the margin was too small to call the gains significant.

To measure attitude and habit formation, a survey of the target group was administered at the end of the SSR study (appendix three). The survey revealed a high degree of acceptance of the SSR activity as well as an indication of the success of SSR as a "hook" in increasing at-home reading (table four).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this L2 study of SSR are consistent with other L1 SSR studies. Those studies indicated that SSR was effective over the long term - where it was used for at least a year. While the RC and V gains of this study cannot be considered significant from a statistical point of view, it would have been interesting to find out if the gap between the target and control groups widened as the study approached and passed the twelve or twenty-four month marks in duration. Unfortunately, the organization of the intensive English program at the ILI and the rapid turnover of the student population make a longer-term study an impossibility at the present time.

Also worth noting is the high level of student acceptance of SSR. Far from being a boring interlude in the ESL curriculum, the SSR activity was seen as an enjoyable break from the usual structured activities of class. Students looked forward to it, particularly once they were involved in reading a novel or short story.

A final note is materials selection. Finding suitable materials for the subjects of this study was no problem because they had mastered English sufficiently to handle reading books and magazines. Lower-level students obviously need special consideration. In addition to graded readers (available at all levels of difficulty from major ESL publishers), resources include book collections (see Grubaugh's bibliography) and comic books (see Wright (1979) for a comic book readability index).

TABLE ONE

TABLE 1.7 Studies of Sustained Silent Reading

Study	*Grades*	*Duration*	*Measure*	*Results*
I. SSR as part of a regular program				
Oliver, 1973	4–6	1 month	RC	Equivalent to comparisons
Oliver, 1976	4–6	3 months	RC	Equivalent to comparisons
Evans & Towner, 1975	4	10 weeks	RC	Equivalent to comparisons
Collins, 1980	2–6	15 weeks	RC Vocab	Equivalent to comparisons
Lawson, 1968	6	3 months	Vocab RC	SSR superior Regular program superior
Elley et al, 1979	High school	2 years	RC Writing	Equivalent to comparisons
II. SSR as supplement to regular program				
Maynes, 1981	2–6	1 year[a]	RC	No additional gains
Schon et al. 1982	2–4	1 year	RC	SSR superior
Manning & Manning, 1984	4	1 year	RC	"Peer-interaction" superior to pure SSR and controls
III. SSR as the exclusive language arts program				
Farrell, 1982	8	1 year	RC	Significant gains[b]
Elley & Mangubhai, 1983	4–6	2 years	RC Grammar Writing	SSR superior SSR superior SSR superior

a. One year = one academic year, fall to spring.
b. No comparison group used.
RC = Reading Comprehension

7

TABLE 2.7 Self-Selected Reading Compared to Regular (Basal) Programs

Study	*Grades*	*Duration*	*Measure*	*Results*
Jenkins, 1957	2	1 year	RC Vocab	Self-sel superior Self-sel superior
Bohnhorst & Sellers, 1959	1–3	2 years	RC	Self-sel superior
Sartain, 1960	2	3 months	RC RC	No difference[a] Regular superior[b]
Gordon & Clark, 1961	2	4 months	RC	Self-sel superior
Greenman & Kapilian, 1959	3–4	1 year	RC	Self-sel superior
Aronow, 1961	4–5	2 years, 4 months	RC	Self-sel superior
Healy, 1963	5	1 year	RC	Self-sel superior
Lawson, 1968	6	3 months	RC Vocab	Regular superior Regular superior

a. "Good readers."
b. "Slow readers."

TABLE 4.7 Sustained Silent Reading and Self-Selected Reading Programs: Analysis of Results According to Duration of Treatment

Duration	*Positive*	*No Difference*	*Negative*
Less than 1 year	7	5[a]	3
1 year	11	2	2
Greater than 1 year	8	2	0

Note: Positive = SSR or self-selecting students outperform comparison students or published norms. See Tables 1.7, 2.7, and 3.7.
a. In these studies, SSR or self-selected reading was part or all of the language arts program; "no difference" can thus be interpreted as evidence in favor of reading exposure (see text).

8

TABLE TWO

READING COMPREHENSION RESULTS

	Average Score (%) Before Semester	Average Score (%) After Semester	% Change
Control Group 1 (5 students)	65	72	+7
Control Group 2 (4 students)	70	80	+10
Composite: Control Groups 1,2 (9 students)	67.5	76	+8.5
SSR Group (7 students)	67	79	+12

TABLE THREE

VOCABULARY RESULTS (CELT)

	Average Score (%) Before Semester	Average Score (%) After Semester	% Change
Control Group 1 (5 students)	50.8	59.2	+8.4
Control Group 2 (4 students)	47.5	58.0	+10.50
Composite: Control Groups 1,2 (9 students)	49.15	58.6	+9.45
SSR Group (7 students)	49.0	59.71	+10.71

TABLE FOUR

SSR CLASS SURVEY

5=strongly agree
1=strongly disagree

Question	Average Response	
1. fun	4.44	
2. useful for vocab.	4.1	
3. useful for RC	4.3	
4. enough time	3.8	
5. too difficult	2.7	
6. waste of time	2.2	
7. recommend	4.6	
8. different reading material	2.22	(one request for more National Geog.)

comments: course pretty good/reading enjoyable and useful/(no negative comments)

9. continued reading after class	3.3	

0 "never" responses
1 "rarely" response (not enough time because of other homework)

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numbers one and eight based on nine students' responses
other numbers based on ten students' responses

APPENDIX ONE

VOCABULARY BANK

(deposit #2)

unpalatable adj. = distasteful Do you think the food in the cafeteria is unpalatable? No, it's delicious.

greedy adj. = having a strong desire for material things
You don't have to be so greedy; there is plenty more food in the kitchen. Your plate is overflowing.

fence n. = a barrier to prevent escape or intrusion or to mark a boundary
Farmers often build fences around their fields to prevent their cattle from wandering away.

fence v. (slang) = to sell stolen goods The burglar tried to fence the VCR he had taken from the victim's house.

fleet n.=a group of ships, planes or trucks under unified control
Our company has the largest fleet of radio equipped trucks on the west coast of Florida. We can be at your service quickly.

aggravate v.=intensify unpleasantly; irritate When I fell on the ice the other day, I aggravated an old knee injury. It had not bothered me for a while, but it really hurts now.

pristine adj. = uncorrupted by civilization We saw several pristine lakes when we were vacationing in northern Canada.

bewigged adj. = wearing a wig In England judges are bewigged and wear long, black robes while they hear their cases.

stupendous adj. = awesome; marvelous; tremendous
The dinner we had at R.G.'s was stupendous!

rife adj. = abundant; common (usu. used with "with") Washington, D.C. is rife with rumors about what happened in the Iran Arms affair.

whimsical adj. = resulting from or characterized by fantasy
The play CATS is a whimsical story based on the writing of T.S. Eliot. The characters are all dressed as cats.

perpetrate v. = commit Two individuals perpetrated the crime.

frolic v. = to play and run about happily There were a lot of children frolicking in the park.

bootleg v. = to produce or sell illicitly; to smuggle such goods
People bootleg millions of dollars worth of drugs into the United States every year.

lych-gate n. = a roofed gate in a churchyard under which a bier rests during the initial part of the burial service.
The coffin rested peacefully under the lych-gate.

APPENDIX TWO

LEVEL III
R/C MIDTERM

INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE INSTITUTE
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Read the following article carefully and answer the questions listed below (30 points)

All of us communicate with one another nonverbally, as well as with words. Most of the time we're not aware that we're doing it. We gesture with eyebrows or a hand, meet someone else's eyes and look away, shift positions in a chair. These actions we assume are random and incidental. But researchers have discovered in recent years that there is a system to them almost as consistent and comprehensible as language. (1)

Every culture has its own body language, and children absorb its nuances along with spoken language. A Frenchman talks and moves in French. The way an Englishman crosses his legs is nothing like the way a male American does it. In talking, Americans are likely to end a statement with a droop of the head or hand, or a lowering of the eyelids. They end a question with a lift of the hand, a tilt of the chin, or a widening of the eyes. With a future-tense verb, they often gesture with a forward movement. (2)

One of the most potent elements in body language is eye behavior. Americans are careful about how and when they meet one another's eyes. In our normal conversations, each eye contact lasts only about a second before one or both individuals look away. When two Americans look searchingly into each other's eyes, emotions are heightened and the relationship becomes more intimate. Therefore, we carefully avoid this, except in appropriate circumstances. (3)

Proper street behavior in the United States requires a nice balance of attention and inattention. You are supposed to look at a passerby just enough to show that you're aware of his presence. If you look too little, you appear haughty or secretive; too much, and you're inquisitive. Usually what happens is that people eye each other until they are about eight feet apart, at which point both cast their eyes down. Sociologist Dr. Irving Goffman describes this as " a kind of dimming of lights." In parts of the Far East, it is impolite to look at the other person at all during the conversation. In England the polite listener stares at the speaker attentively and blinks his eyes occasionally as a sign of interest. That eye blink says nothing to Americans, who expect the listener to nod or murmur something such as "mmm-hmm." (4)

Recent studies by psychologists suggest that posture often reflects a person's attitude toward people he is with. One experiment indicates that when men are with other men they dislike, they relax either very little or very much - depending on whether they see the other man as threatening. Women in this experiment, on the other hand, always signaled dislike with a relaxed posture. And men, paired with women they disliked, were never tense enough to sit rigidly. (5)

Anthropologist Dr. Edward T. Hall points out that for adult male North Americans who don't know each other, the comfortable distance to stand for private conversation is from arm's length to about four feet apart. The South American prefers to stand much closer, which creates problems when the two meet face to face. For, as the South American moves in, the North American feels he's being pushy. And as the North American backs off, the South American feels he's being standoffish. (6)

The American and the Arab are even less compatible in their space habits. Arabs like close contact. In some instances, they stand very close together to talk, staring intently into each other's eyes and breathing into each other's face. These are actions that the American may associate with sexual intimacy, and he may find it disturbing to be subjected to them in a nonsexual context. (7)

The amount of space a man needs is also influenced by his personality - introverts, for example, seem to need more room than extroverts. Situation and mood also affect distance. Moviegoers waiting in line to see a sexy film will line up much more densely than those waiting to see family-entertainment movie. (8)

Communication between human beings would be dull if it were all done with words. But, actually, words are often the smallest part of it. (9)

A Write the correct answer on your answer sheet.

1. The main idea of this article is that:
   a. kinesics is a new science.
   b. body movements are as important as words in communication.
   c. people from different cultures have different space requirements.

2. In paragraph 2 the last sentence is:
   a. the main idea of the paragraph
   b. an example supporting the main idea
   c. the conclusion of the paragraph

3. The subject of paragraphs 3 and 4 are:
   a. eye behavior
   b. American eye behavior
   c. Oriental eye behavior

4. According to paragraph 3, if you wanted to make an American person uncomfortable, you could:
   a. interpret his eye behavior
   b. stare into his eyes for one second
   c. stare into his eyes for a long time.

5. The facts in paragraph #5 concern:

   a. posture: recent psychological studies.
   b. posture: reflection of attitudes toward others.
   c. posture: reflection of tension.

6. The subject of paragraphs 6, 7, and 8 is:
   a. space requirements
   b. cultural differences
   c. personality differences.

7. In paragraph 6, it is implied, but not directly stated, that:
   a. if two North Americans are friends, they may stand close to one another during conversations.
   b. South Americans stand too close to each other when they speak.
   c. South Americans cause problems when they speak to North Americans.

8. In paragraph 8, which of the following is not mentioned as affecting distance:
   a. personality
   b. films
   c. conversation

9. A good title for the selection would be:
   a. How to use Body Language.
   b. Body Language: A Modern Means of Communication.
   c. Communication through Body Language.

10. The conclusion of this article is that:
    a. communication between human beings is usually dull.
    b. the smallest words are best in effective communication.
    c. communication without body language would be dull.

B. Write T (true) or F (false) on your answer sheet.

1. According to this article, facial expression and body movements are as important as words in communication.

2. In a normal conversation between Americans, eye contact lasts about 4 seconds before one or both individuals look away.

3. According to the experiment in this article when a woman is with someone she does not like, she always adopts a very relaxed posture.

4. South Americans and Arabs are more similar in their space requirements than North Americans and Arabs are.

5. A very aggressive, outgoing person needs less space than a passive, introverted person.

APPENDIX THREE

For each of the statements below, please circle the number that most closely expresses your opinions about the extra reading activity we did this semester.

1=strongly disagree (no,no)
2=disagree (no)
3=yes and no (I don't know or no opinion)
4=agree (yes)
5=strongly agree (yes,yes)

1 2 3 4 5 The extra reading activity was enjoyable (fun).

1 2 3 4 5 It was useful in improving my English vocabulary.

1 2 3 4 5 It was useful in improving my reading comprehension.

1 2 3 4 5 The amount of time allowed for this activity was about right.

1 2 3 4 5 The reading materials were too difficult.

1 2 3 4 5 The activity used time that could have been better used doing other activities.

1 2 3 4 5 I would recommend this activity to other classes and teachers.

1 2 3 4 5 I would have liked different reading materials.

If yes, what kind? _____

Comments: (optional) _____

_____

_____

How often did you continue reading at home what you started to read in class?

always usually sometimes rarely never

If rarely or never, why? _____

_____

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